

THE INFLUENCE OF FEAR OF FAILURE

JACOB M. CHRISTIAN

UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

“Fear of failure has many influences on the human body and mind.”

INTRODUCTION

Fear is a basic human emotion that is felt by all. There are many effects and classifications of fear, one of which is fear of failure. This type of fear exists in almost all environments. In 2013, Bartels and Ryan found that 37.5% of college students have a desire to reach out to counselors to help with their fear of failure in life (p. 48). This is more than one in every three students. It is of no surprise that this growing trend among young people is referred to as a large “social problem” (p.48). Sagar and Jowett (2015) define fear of failure as, “the motive to avoid failing in achievement contents where one’s performance is evaluated” (p. 4). The authors break down fear of failure into five subcategories. See figure 1. The Fear of Failure Multidimensional Model is used to measure fear of failure, similar to Elison (2012) and Sagar and Jowett (2015). The effects of fear of failure are many and are often overlooked. The growing generation needs to be aware of this unspoken reality and they need to be educated on how to

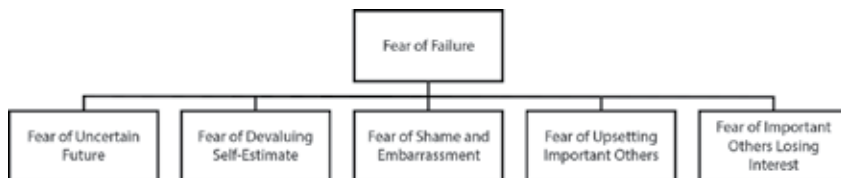


Fig 1. Fear of Failure Multidimensional Model (adapted from Sagar & Jowett, 2015, p. 4)

properly react. There is an abundant need for more research to be performed to able to identify ways to reduce this age-old foe.

BASIC HISTORY

Motivation research suggests that fear of failure is a strong contributor to human behavior and even success (Conroy & Elliot, 2004, p. 272). Conroy and Elliot (2004) argue the multi-faceted Hierarchical Model of Achievement Motivation (created by Elliot, 1998), which will be discussed in depth at a later point in this researched argument, is the main contributor of human motivation (p. 273). Though there is substantial evidence supporting this contemporary claim, Conroy and Elliot state that the evidence is cross-sectional, or agrees with both models; thus, no single model or theory is greater than the other. They compare it with the paradox of the chicken and the egg (2004, p. 271-272). In the past, fear of failure has been identified as having effects such as lowering one's estimate of competency (Bartels & Ryan, 2013, p. 48); these effects have been linked to both relationships with other people as well as the relationship with oneself. Fear of failure has been determined to be multidimensional, which will be examined at a later point in this paper (p. 48).

COPING STRATEGIES

It is clear that there is a problem with people fearing, in many cases, things they cannot control. They fear that they will fail at some point in their lives. The question arises: How will they react to or cope with such a failure? One study consisted of taking college athletes and analyzing how they coped with certain stressful and potentially shame-inducing situations. The athletes were then grouped by the way they coped with these situations. The coping styles identified were: "attack self, withdrawal, attack other, and avoidance" (Elison et al., 2012, p. 20). The groups were then analyzed based on gender and the type of sport. The authors concluded that gender does play a vital role when it comes to coping styles—women generally favor "attack self," while men more frequently use "avoidance" (p. 32-33). The type of sport also plays a large factor, as more competitive team sports favor "attack other" and "avoidance." Those who fear failure focus on meeting the minimum standard rather than striving for excellence.

COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Individuals who fear failure tend to suffer feelings of shame and a heightened sense of failure compared to those who do not fear failure as strongly (Bartels & Herman, 2011, p. 3). Bartels and Herman state, "Individuals who fear failure tend to underutilize cognitive strategies that would enhance academic performance and over-utilize cognitive strategies that increase the odds of failure" (p. 3). Perhaps the most popularly utilized

strategy that increases the odds of failure is “self-handicapping.” This is openly defined as placing an obstacle on oneself prior to performance, which has the purpose of protecting one’s self-esteem in the event of failure. This cushions the blow of failure so that it is not felt as terribly. Bartels and Herman suggest that it shields the emotional consequences of failure (p. 3). Studies agree with this consensus, as can be seen in the figure below of the results of Bartels and Herman’s study on the topic (p. 7). It is clearly noted that negative emotions are felt less among those who limit themselves by placing these barriers than those who fail without self-handicapping themselves. “Ambiguous failure” (p. 6) refers to any type of failure that does not include self-handicapping, such as performing poorly on an exam or making a mistake in a piano recital. On the other hand, self-handicapping refers to when the person themselves puts up a mental barrier to provide that person an excuse to have failed. An example of this would be a college student telling him or herself that they can’t pass math 1050 because it is their worst subject. See figure 2.

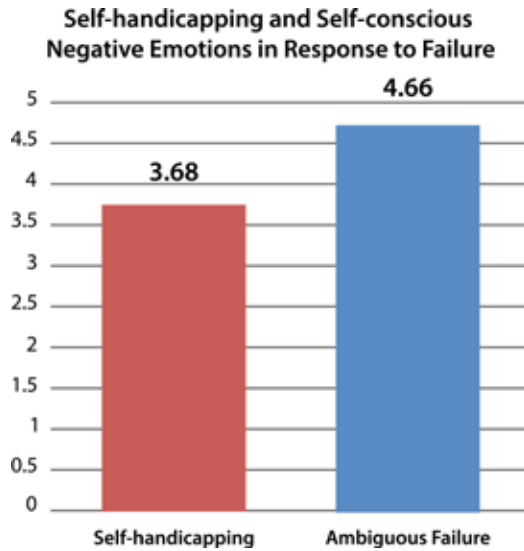


Figure 2. Mean differences in negative self-conscious emotional responses to the self-handicapping scenario and ambiguous failure scenario among participants high in fear of failure.

Bartels, J., and J. Ryan (2011, p. 7)

Another popular cognitive strategy is “self-acceptance.” College students are often bombarded with many challenges and in some cases even crises (Arıcak, Dündar & Saldaña, 2015, p. 362). These challenges may include social pressure and the stress of choosing an occupation while maintaining desirable grades. Arıcak et al. (2015) imply

that having a social media network is now a social requirement (p. 362). While it is clear that there are many positive sides to social media, there are also many elements that are concerning. Palfrey and Gasser (2014) state, “Social identities are much richer, more varied, and more persistent—and far less under our control—than ever before” (Arıcak et al., 2014, p. 363). Due to this lack of control, Arıcak et al. defined the importance of self-acceptance as, “an individual’s acceptance of all his/her positive and negative sides” (p. 363). In Arıcak et al.’s study, 53.4% of students responded that they are authentic when using social media, 41.3% admitted that they are more honest in person than on social media, and 5.3% stated that they are more honest on social media than in person (p. 365). Arıcak et al. (2014) found that personal values affect an individual’s self-acceptance (p. 364). Those who chose freedom as their defining personal value were typically more willing to accept themselves for who they are (p. 370). Being able to accept themselves for who they are can be referred to as being able to live authentically.

MOTIVATION

When it comes to how one lives, some may ask the question: Why do certain people do things a certain way? The determining factor is what that person considers important and what motivates them. Motivation is split into sections. Conroy and Elliot (2004) call this the Hierarchical Model of Achievement Motivation (p. 273). Four achievement goals can be identified: mastery-approach (MAp), mastery-avoidance (MAv), performance-approach (PAp) and performance-avoidance (PAv) (p. 273). These have very specific indicators:

MAp goals are positive predictors of deep processing and intrinsic motivation ... MAv goals are positive predictors of disorganized studying and state test anxiety; PAp goals are positive predictors of surface processing, grade aspirations and exam performance; and PAv goals are positive predictors of state test anxiety and procrastination and negative predictors of intrinsic motivation and exam performance. (p. 273-274)

It is also noted that fear of failure is directly correlated with MAv, PAp and Pav (p. 283). At the end of this study, the researchers concluded that reducing fear of failure would reduce performance avoidance goals which is defined as a person attempting to not fail rather than trying to succeed (p. 275). Bartels and Ryan (2013) agree that many achievement goals, in specific, PAv, have been linked to not being internally motivated, having poor performance, and not being able to retain information after an extended period of time (p. 43). They continue to state that there are various consequences for

both fear of failure and achievement goals (MA_v, PA_p and PA_v) that extend far beyond the college campus. Bartels and Ryan discuss some of the physical tolls that can be experienced as being, “more health center visits ... anorexia, male sexual dysfunction, and clinical headache disorders” (p. 44). These side-effects are both physically and emotionally taxing.

ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Both physical and emotional states can affect the academic performance of a person. A study was performed observing the differences in academic performances of children in junior high. Wach, Spengler, Gottschling and Spinath (2015) questioned whether gender plays as large a role as it was previously considered to. They identified how fear of failure affects adolescents and their academic progress. In the study, the school subjects of German and Math were compared to identify any correlations. The study found that the gender stereotype of females having higher test scores was not found in the study, as male and females had similar performances. It was discovered that fear of failure only affected females noticeably when dealing with mathematics. “A possible explanation for this finding is that Math has a more intimidating effect for girls, maybe again due to gender-stereotyped beliefs that girls perform not as well in Math as boys” (as cited in Wach et al., 2015, p. 110). This is a prime example of self-handicapping.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are what some would consider a staple to our society and have been for centuries. The question may arise: Why do college students undermine this valued staple and have sexual interactions with no intention of committing to one another? Snapp (2014) and other scholars believe that from birth we have the need to seek the attention of others. The attention we seek is known as an “attachment bond” (p. 469). Snapp (2014) also states that this bond, or psychological need, can influence one’s sexual behavior; thus, giving these college students the urge to hook up (p. 469).

Snapp (2014) studies three types of attachment bonds: “secure attachment,” “avoidance,” and “attachment anxiety” (p. 469). “Avoidance” occurs when one individual desires to maintain emotional distance from other parties; however, they may use sexual activity as a reflection of personal importance or an increase in status (p. 470). “Attachment anxiety” is when one feels the need for an extreme closeness with another. They also possess a strong fear of rejection and abandonment (p. 471). When neither of these are present or are minimal, the individual is considered to be in a “secure attachment,” or, in other words, they have a positive view on relationships. Both “attachment avoidance” and “attachment anxiety” have a common theme in that

they are both caused by fear, whether that fear is of rejection or of failure. It is clear that the aforementioned college students satisfy this desire by their actions, perhaps needing to feel wanted even if it is only for one night. Many would argue that this is a Pyrrhic Victory—where the victor’s losses are as great as those of the loser—in and of itself. It is certain that there are consequences for having sexual relations with a person without having any plans for commitment.

The concept of studying the positive and negative effects with something such as the impact a coach can have on a player, with regard to the fear of failure, has not been studied in depth. Sagar and Jowett (2015) state that “no previous study has examined the adoption of self-control and relationship quality as potentially positive regulatory strategies to diffuse one’s fear of failure” (p. 6). As previously discussed, there are five subcategories under which fear of failure can be defined, as shown in figure 1: “fear of uncertain future, fear of devaluing self-estimate, fear of shame and embarrassment, fear of upsetting important others, and fear of important others losing interest” (as cited in Sagar & Jowett, 2015, p. 4). Sagar uses Conroy’s model to measure fear of failure, similar to Elison (2012) and Sagar and Jowett (2015). “Fear of shame and embarrassment,” “fear of upsetting important others,” and “fear of important others losing interest” are all active when a player is performing in front of a mentor or, in this case, a coach. Such a relationship can have many effects, including an increase in trust, allowing the player to become vulnerable to the coach. However, the player can also be affected negatively by feeling pressure to perform well, and this pressure could potentially damage the relationship with the coach. Although research is not conclusive, it is clear that a mentoring role can have both positive and negative effects on those being mentored.

The way that students interact with their peers due to fear of failure must not be overlooked. Another study by Sager et al. (2011) observed how fear of failure affects student athletes on an interpersonal level, both on the field and in the classroom. The purpose of the study was to focus on and be able to predict anti-social behavior of the participants. Anti-social behavior refers to behavior that would not be condoned by others, including aggressive or physical behavior, offensive or rude comments to others, etc. Questionnaires were completed by 331 college athletes—176 male and 155 female—with the average age being 20 years old. The result of the study was that males tend to engage more often in antisocial behavior than females on the field as well as in social aspects. It was suggested that men were antisocial due to higher levels of competitiveness. The authors concluded that fear of failure and sports experience should both be considered when attempting to understand antisocial behavior in men and women (p. 405). Elison and Partridge agree that men and women are affected in

different ways by fear of failure and cope in different ways (2011, p. 32). Sagar et al. (2011) do not call for any course of action, but do recommend considering how fear of failure is affecting the lives of those around us (p. 404-405).

INTRAPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Student relationships are generally viewed as being interpersonal. However, it is important that the student's intrapersonal relationships not be overlooked. As has already been stated, the fear of failure is multidimensional, which refers to the multiple effects that it can have on a person. On the intrapersonal level, Bartels and Ryan state:

For example, a student's fear of failure in a particular class is, in part, a product of the resultant lowering of perceived ability (i.e., devaluing of one's self-estimate), having to retake the course (i.e., non-ego punishment), and the disappointment of his family (i.e., social devaluation) which may be expected upon failure (2013, p. 42)

The consequences of this situation include shame and embarrassment. These emotions will affect how the student interacts with those around them. Depending on which coping strategy is selected, the consequences could be mere ripples or as large as a tsunami. As noted previously, a male student would be more likely to choose "attack others" or "avoidance", while a female student would be more likely to select "attack self" or "withdraw." Regardless of the strategy used, it would affect each student academically, in other attachment bonds, or in their relationships with others.

CONCLUSION

The claws of fear of failure are as sharp as glass and as strong as steel. It is difficult to escape its grasp. After much research, it is concluded that fear of failure has many influences on the human body and mind. Many of these influences are overlooked and need to be examined further. These influences affect every aspect of life for college students and young adults, ranging from academic success to sexual behavior. Until now, this topic has often been considered "taboo" to discuss. However, it is essential that the next generation is warned about these daily obstacles. Perhaps it could be discussed in the classroom setting, including health classes and beyond. The evidence is not conclusive, but it does suggest that the majority of the influences of fear of failure are negative. The growing generation will face these negative influences, and there may be nothing that can be done to prevent them. It is important to give future students a better opportunity to succeed in life by helping educate them on how to properly cope with any fear of failing. Rather than allowing students to pursue excellence, fear of failure limits their aim to the average.

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